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ABSTRACT

This report discusses the five-year history of the Mountain-Plains Education and Economic Development Program. In broad terms, the program is viewed as a human development program and not simply as a technical training program. The adult population it serves is defined as rural disadvantaged, and the primary selection criterion is un/underemployment. Intensive developmental career guidance including awareness, exploration, and choice is the critical area of the core curriculum, although other important general need areas (health education, consumer education, parent effectiveness training, and home management training) are also addressed. After a career choice is made, students enter specific career preparation programs which include work experience and permanent job placement. The unique aspect of the program design is that entire families participate in the program. Based on research and experience, the program developers found that putting an individual into an artificial program environment, working with him, and then returning him to his unaltered family environment pre-assure a high failure rate. The author attempts to inform others about the program and to stimulate a new interest in the "unvisible" foundations of educational approaches, particularly those for disadvantaged adults. (Author/PC)

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A Brief Overview of the Mountain-Plains Program

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Introduction

"The Mountain-Plains Education and Economic Development Program is a research and development program. This same institution/project is often referred to by the names Mountain-Plains, National Model IV, and Career Education Model IV. Mountain-Plains is a five-year research and development program funded by a twenty million dollar grant from the National Institute of Education.

A unique strength at Mountain-Plains is that shorter programs and projects often only find new ways to fail. Because we are a five-year program, we stumbled for two years, and still had time left. As a result we think we now know what we are doing. Today I'd like to share our experience and overall program design emphasizing what we now know works.

Because it is a human development program, and not simply a technical training program, Mountain-Plains is often misunderstood. This developmental emphasis should be kept in mind as the design unfolds.

Population, Area, and Institutional Base

The population is defined as rural disadvantaged. This means the number one selection criteria to enter the program is un/underemployment. It's a regional program - taking in six northcentral states; Nebraska, the Dakotas, Montana, Wyoming and Idaho. (Roughly 22% of the land mass of the United States and 2% of the population - those of you from similar Provinces in Canada are acquainted with the low population density.) It's an educational model in that we have been able to start, not with any school system, but with buildings on an Air Force Base, some money, and an idea, and try to design in the kinds of things that many educators have been saying should be in school systems for some time. I'll try now to define some of these things, beginning with selection and entry.

Selection

Offices in each of the six states recruit students through contacts with agencies, direct advertising, religious organizations, Employment Security Commission, etc. They then discuss with these students the possibility of entering the Mountain-Plains Program, talking to them about the minimum prerequisites. Un/underemployment is the inclusive attendance criteria. Exclusive criteria include reading and math levels. Mountain-Plains does not deal with illiterates. Prospective students are given the WRAT (Wide Range Achievement Test) in the states and they must test at a 4.50 grade math and a 5.0 grade reading level. Because we are an educational institution and not an alcohol rehabilitation program we will take people who are identified as problem drinkers, but not people who are wet alcoholics. Mountain-Plains is not a mental hospital, students are expected, because of life condition, to be neurotic, they are not expected to be psychotic (i.e. students must be able to function without strict environmental controls). Also, families who have medical problems that cannot be serviced with local medical facilities are not selected. If one has some exotic disease and thus requires special medicines and special treatments, these often are not available in Northeastern Montana. Thus, these are some main areas that the State offices focus on in terms of selecting students for the program: reading and math level, level of psychological functioning (including level of alcohol problems), and medical problems. Additionally, as student educational stipends are limited, a financial analysis enables Mountain-Plains to avoid placing students in an untenable position as regards current debts.

Program selection is also a preguidance situation, in that the overall nature of the program is explained (including the fact that it is not merely a technical

training program - that other things are available and required such as personal/family and comprehensive career development, counseling, parent effectiveness training, etc). Occupational areas available at Mountain-Plains are explained, enabling those who have no interest in any of the areas offered to select themselves out at that particular time. After satisfying the aforegoing, students are admitted to Mountain-Plains. Relocation expenses are then paid to Glasgow Air Force Base which provides the facilities for the program.

Finally, Mountain-Plains deals exclusively with family units. In the keynote address I heard some talk about broadening the scope of your public education and maybe looking at the whole family more and not just at the child in Canadian public education. In a similar vein, at Mountain-Plains we look at the whole family - not just at the head of the household.

Orientation and Core Curriculum

During seven days of orientation, information sessions extend the preguidance initiated at the selection point by "fine-tuning" the information about the program. In the latter stages of orientation students complete pretests of all kinds which are used in educational plan development and/or research. After orientation, the student enters three weeks of what is called core curriculum. This is the only "all-for-everybody" part of the Mountain-Plains Program. Orientation and core curriculum are the only reminants of the "sabertooth curriculum".

Career Guidance

The core of the core curriculum is Career Guidance. The need for guidance, in fact, was the cause for creating the core curriculum. One can not individualize

without assessment and guidance and one can not do guidance eight hours per day. (Rather one must come and get some things, let one's head digest them, and then return.) Intensive developmental career guidance; including awareness, exploration and choice are the critical core of the core curriculum; although other important general need areas (health education, consumer education, parent effectiveness training, and home management training) also are addressed.

Preparation

After the career choice is made students proceed into their specific career preparation program. The preparation program includes foundation education (math, and English), equivalency testing for the high school certificate (at the student's option), and the chosen occupational preparation area (e.g. automotives, marketing and distribution, electrical) and counseling. Personal/family therapeutic counseling may or may not have started during core curriculum depending on whether or not a need for immediate counseling had been expressed/identified.

At the final stages of occupational preparation students go into the Career Guidance World of Work program which includes resume writing, interview techniques with video-tape feedback, employee attitude discussions, etc. Finally, a two to six week Work Experience serves as the final integration device and final test for the whole program. It's an actual on-job Work Experience in local business or industry. If a student fails the Work Experience, he participates in a team conference with counselors and instructors to decide his fate - usually "recycling" into prescribed program elements. Exit Orientation, and job placement round out the catalog of program activities.

Within this overall framework, I'd like to start highlighting some of the things that make this a unique program, not in terms of any one thing being unique but I think in terms of all of them being put together in one place.

Some Program Design Principles

Environment. First much of the environment is under Mountain-Plains control. Mountain-Plains rents the housing and controls payment of the "scholarship".* The payment method is a vital element: Students get up to $80 a week for their participation, but the scholarship is not paid gratis. Students get time cards ("real world" simulation) that are stamped in the various classes. Students are paid for the actual hours of attendance. When one reviews the poverty/manpower programs of the 60's it seems many persons came and merely maintained and were only seen for payline. At Mountain-Plains, if a person only shows up for payline on Friday, it's a futile effort. In effect, we have a "real-token" token economy.

Preparation Areas. Occupational areas are derived from job market projections in the six-state areas. This avoids training students in areas where no jobs are available. Areas of training also avoid the "sabertooth" traditionalism approach.

Open Entry/Open Exit. Families enter and leave the program every week - an average of about six in and six out. There is no semester system, no quarter system, and no summer session. Students can schedule entry at any time during the year.

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* I prefer to use the word "scholarship" because of its image building value with students. The most correct word is "stipend".

Emphasis on the family. Hindsight shows us that, particularly in working with the disadvantaged, to deal with one person in a family and expect to get and maintain gain is pretty ridiculous. Taking a person, putting him in an artificial environment, teaching him, say, carpentry, and then shoving him back into his family interpersonal environment that is unchanged, is to pre-assure a high failure rate. Working only with one member of the family promotes instability and tends to decrease life satisfaction and employability (this contention has a solid theory and research base). As these are Mountain-Plains' goals and those of manpower/poverty programs generally, the family approach is felt to be a program design essential.

Instruction is individualized/independent. Students test in at particular levels. When career goals are chosen in Career Guidance, it is possible to develop educational plans for each individual to enter at his own level and progress at his own rate in order to acquire the skills needed to succeed in his chosen career. Likewise, the student chooses, directly or indirectly, programs to assist his personal and family development in the personal and family development programs. The student thus has basic control over his own education. This is felt to be a desirable end at any level and an absolute essential for adult education.

Separation of Guidance and Counseling.* Traditionally, when guidance and counseling are together one or the other always seems to get slighted depending on the individual preference of the counselor. This would seem to indicate some different

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* The Career Guidance/Development and the Personal and Family Development Counseling programs are not detailed here as the former was the subject of a previous program and a presentation of the latter follows this presentation.

variables are involved in being effective as a career guidance/career development counselor, than in being an effective therapist. When we look for people for the career development/guidance area we look for a different person than when we look for people for the personal/family development counseling area. Although we are now unable to define these differences for you in formal terms, we have studies planned to aid formal elaboration of those differences.

Criterion Referenced Testing. No attainment testing is normative. No grade system is in use. "Can X student take the carburetor out of the car, put the carburetor kit on it, put the carburetor back on the car, get the car running, get the carburetor tuned, and do it in a reasonable length of time?" Criterian referenced attainment - no grades and no failures, he's there until he does it. Not only does this allow Mountain-Plains to state with some certainty what a student can do, but it allows a student who comes in with a lot of ability, and/or a lot of experience, and/or a lot of intelligence to rip through the program in as little as three months, whereas the student who comes in with less ability, intelligence, or whatever may take a year to do the same thing. The educational plans that are written for these two students will be different because they'll need different things. No sabertooth curriculum, no all-for-everybody. Enter at your own level, go at your own rate, exit when you prove that you can do it. Under other systems an instructor can "pass" a student just to get him out of his class. At Mountain-Plains, the instructor validates skill, not relative skill, and knows that the student also has to be validated on work experience in a garage downtown where the employer who has provided that work experience station is not interested in anything except the production through his shop. Our student has to produce at least as much in work as the employer loses in supervision time. If the student can't do it he loses

more in supervision time than he gains in student productivity. We have set up this independent check on ourselves with the work experience. This work experience is operated by the Career Guidance program, not by the occupational preparation instructors. This doubly independent check on ourselves allows us to spot and "recycle" our mistakes before they leave the school and our influence, it allows a second chance both for the student and the school.

Completion Reward. Since this is a counselors conference we will use the counseling example to illustrate the idea of completion reward. The criterion for counseling completion is essentially the professiona' judgment on the part of the Career Guidance Counselor or the Therapeutic Counselor as regards this person's ability to function productively with his family and on a job situation. So in essence counseling is required. At first glance it may seem both distasteful and questionably ethically to require people to go to counseling. Mountain-Plains justifies that on a couple of bases; one is that it is explained to students before they come that counseling is part of the pie and that they have to eat the whole thing. The second is that the requirement is not absolute - students do not have to come to counseling. But if they don't, it costs them a chunk of money when they leave. All students receive a completion reward based on how much they complete plus pay for any vacation/sick time that was unused. Conversely, everytime a student doesn't finish something, the reward shrinks. Thus, a student does not have to go to counseling. He doesn't have to work out his temper problem, in personal counseling, for example, nor does he have to go down to World of Work and develop his interview technique. But if he doesn't do these things, it decreases the completion reward.

Adjuncts to Environmental Control. Mountain-Plains is a "company town", controlling pretty much the whole environment except the hobby shop and the bar (and there have been times I wished that I could control that bar!). So we have a "Skinner box," but since we're humanitarians, we have Carl Rogers living in our "Skinner box". We try to be warm, and emphathetic, and to employ a lot of unconditional positive regard. We put William Glasser in our "Skinner box" too. We don't want to focus on the past. An opportunity now exists, for, "Don't give me your sob story Jack, that was yesterday, today you've got this chance, what are you going to do with it?" Glasser, Rogers, and Skinner blend better than many would suppose.

Summary. The most important elements about the overall Mountain-Plains Program is that it is developmental, it is eclectic, and it is effective. At Mountain-Plains we don't care who developed an idea or technique, or what their philosophical perspective was. The only question we have is, "Will it work for us in terms of helping a very tough population develop abilities that allow them to achieve success in employment and satisfaction in life?" This presentation is the tip of the iceberg. We are now in the process of defining areas below the surface. The major aim of this presentation has been to inform you of our program, and to stimulate a new interest in the "unvisible" foundations of educational approaches in general and of those for adult and disadvantaged persons in particular. Some of you earlier expressed an interest in seeing the program first-hand. I am sure that if you would contact the Executive Director, Mr. Bruce C. Perryman, that the Executive Offices would be happy to arrange a tour.